



OUTWARD BOUND VETERANS

Chad Spangler, National Director

Written Statement for the Record

on

Overcoming PTSD: Assessing the VA's Efforts to Promote Wellness and Healing

A hearing held before

House of Representatives Committee on Veterans Affairs

June 7th, 2017



The challenges facing today's veterans are well documented and alarming. Nearly 57% of veterans enrolled in Veteran Affairs (VA) services who deployed after September 11, 2001 have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder. (*Epidemiology Program, Post Deployment Health Group, Office of Public Health, Veterans Health Administration, & Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015*)

As Chairman Roe noted in his opening remarks "Since 2010, the number of veterans receiving care for PTSD from the VA healthcare system has grown by more than 50 percent and despite historic and ever-increasing investments in VA mental health services and supports since the turn of the century, suicide rates among veterans with PTSD are not declining."

Furthermore, veterans' underutilization of (Hundt et al. 2014) and stigma towards traditional mental health interventions (*Burman, Merideth, Tanielian & Jaycox, 2009; Vogt, Fox, & Di Leone, 2014*) exacerbate veterans' mental health needs.

Given the complexity of the challenges facing this generation of veterans, and their reluctance to engage in traditional forms of mental health treatment it is critical that our nation explore therapeutic alternatives that do not carry the same perceived stigma to help veterans successfully navigate the transition to civilian lives.

One complementary approach that has shown promise in preliminary studies is Outward Bound Veterans. (OBV)

Outward Bound

At Outward Bound we utilize some of our nation's most inspiring wilderness locations as classrooms to provide unparalleled opportunities for a variety of populations to experience self-discovery, personal growth, self-reliance, teamwork, and compassion. Outward Bound methodology is driven by the fundamental belief that physically and mentally challenging experiences, when facilitated by trained outdoor professionals, can help participants discover their strength of character, ability to lead, and foster a desire to serve in their homes, communities, and our nation.



Outward Bound Veterans

OBV is a primary program of Outward Bound. Originally established in 1983, OBV has helped thousands of veterans and active duty service members readjust to life at home through 6-7 day expeditions that capitalize on the healing power of teamwork and challenge through use of the natural world at no cost to the veteran participants. Curriculum is built on the foundation of Outward Bound methodology, but has been custom-designed to support veteran transitions. Program design and delivery is driven by the belief that veterans possess a wealth of highly-valued skills as a result of their service, and that while the transition to civilian lives is challenging for many veterans they are not defined by those challenges. These transformative programs intend to reconnect veterans to those skills and the strength associated with military service in a civilian context, while simultaneously addressing the challenges veterans face transitioning to civilian lives.

On expeditions, wilderness activities are used as metaphors for daily life experiences in the pursuit of individual and group excellence, illuminating how the support and collaboration needed to meet goals can positively impact participants' interactions with others at home. Whether whitewater rafting, backcountry mountaineering, kayaking, or sailing, expeditions center on teamwork and challenge. Instructors present sequential activities that gradually increase in both physical and emotional challenge while transferring leadership over to the veteran participants. They emphasize camaraderie and shared life experiences through facilitated conversations about challenges veterans face transitioning to civilian life. Outward Bound Veterans expeditions provide the sense of purpose, trust in one another, and physical challenge that our service men and women experienced in the military. As they work as a group to overcome shared obstacles and achieve shared goals in a non-combat wilderness setting, many veteran participants say they feel more "at home" than they have in all their time back on U.S. soil.

Documented Outcomes

As an organization serving veterans, OBV is committed to the principles of evidence-based intervention for veteran participants. To better understand the psychosocial outcomes of OBV's



work we contracted with the University of Texas to examine the efficacy of our programs for veteran participants. Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data analysis this study highlights promising outcomes across a variety of variables. Highlights of the outcomes include: (Full study available on request)

- A clinically significant improvement in overall mental health
- Significant improvements in symptoms of depression and anxiety
- A decrease in sense of loneliness, and an increase of a sense of social connection
- Significant improvements in veterans' attitudes towards seeking psychological help, an increase in interest in gaining insight about themselves, and an increase in confidence to utilize resources available to them

These outcomes are significant considering the increasing rates of mental health issues among Veterans, particularly issues related to reintegration adjustment, depression, and anxiety/post-traumatic stress. Interpersonal factors, such as loneliness and sense of social connection, and mental health factors, such as depression and post-traumatic stress, are considered critical predictive factors of suicidal ideation.

We are incredibly grateful for the leadership shown, and the work being done by the House Committee on Veterans Affairs to explore alternative and complimentary approaches to veterans' transitions and mental health. We are honored to have the opportunity to contribute to the work of the committee by submitting this written testimony, and would be humbled by the opportunity to participate in future hearings or further discussions regarding complimentary approaches to veterans.